

HARBOUR HIGHLIGHTS



The Wellington Coast has a long history of Maori settlement. The eastern coast of the Harbour was attractive because its sand dunes were suitable for growing kumara. The sea and lakes provided abundant fish, eels and seals, and the forests were other sources of food. The area was occupied by Ngati Ira until 1825, when they were attacked by Te Ati Awa and fled to the Wairarapa. Remains of ovens and stone walls that formed gardens of Maori settlements can still be seen closer to the Baring Head Lighthouse.

The first Europeans to the eastern harbour were whalers and traders although their stays were usually short-lived. The New Zealand Company arrived in Wellington in 1839, followed by European settlers soon after. By 1840 William Deans had a market garden and was raising poultry at Eastbourne. George Day was trading in timber and firewood and sold produce from the Eastern Bays in Wellington and the Wairarapa. Land was soon cleared for farming sheep and cattle as far as Baring Head.

By the early 1900s the area had been changed by farming, logging and extensive fires. These changes prompted the Eastbourne Borough Council of 1911 to purchase land for Muritai Park. Since then other areas have been set aside for parks, reserves and domains. Together they now form East Harbour Regional Park, managed co-operatively by the Wellington Regional Council, Hutt City Council and Department of Conservation.

The Pencarrow Lighthouse, built in 1858, was New Zealand's first permanent lighthouse. Mary Jane Bennett was the wife of former temporary lighthouse keeper George Bennett, who died when he was washed overboard crossing the harbour in 1855. Mary Jane continued keeping the temporary lighthouse, until the new Pencarrow Lighthouse was built. She was the first Keeper, and only woman in New Zealand's history to hold the post of lighthouse keeper. Mary Jane stayed in this position for ten years with her three children before returning to England.

A child's grave surrounded by a white rail fence, visible from the road, rests just below the original lighthouse on the northern side. It is of Evelyn Violet Amy Wood who died in March 1896. She was the daughter of one of the lighthouse keepers.

At least 40 shipwrecks have been recorded between Eastbourne and Baring Head, most of which have long since disappeared. The wreck of the "Maria" as she was trying to enter the harbour in July 1851, with 26 lives lost, sparked action to erect Pencarrow Lighthouse. Owing to occasional fog obscuring the view while visibility at water level was unimpaired, the low-level Pencarrow Head Lighthouse was constructed in 1906. Near the shore-lighthouse on the south side of the wreck of the "Devon" a steamer grounded in August 1913. In favourable conditions, what's left of the "Devon" may be seen underwater as can the wreck of the "Tui" near the north end of Barrett Reef.

Other lighthouses in the Wellington harbour are at Baring Head and on Somes-Matiu Island. Baring Head was the last addition to the number of watched lights in New Zealand and was one of the last to lose its Keeper. The light was first exhibited in 1935 on land donated by the local runholder. During the Second World War it was used by the armed forces as a radar and signal station. Somes-Matiu Lighthouse was the country's first harbour light. The light was first placed in 1866 and replaced by the current tower in 1900. Both lighthouses are fully automated.

The historic Beacon Hill Signal Station has been in operation since 1864. Most parts of the original building remain today. The station maintains a 24 hours per day, 365 days per year watch for shipping movements in and out of Wellington Harbour. This watch is visual (the Mk1 Eyeball), radar and with VHF radio. Communication with vessels is principally by radio. Commercial shipping is logged in and out of the Harbour. Services provided by the station include commercial shipping calls for pilots and launch masters (tugs), berthing information, weather and sea conditions, search and rescue radio links, reports on oil spills and Civil Defence warnings for heavy rain, strong winds, heavy snow, tsunamis or volcanic activity. It is also the Wellington Regional Council's emergency telephone after hours service.

